

Suburban Chicago dad headed to store with toddler says they were pepper-sprayed by federal agents

[washingtonpost.com/national/2025/11/10/immigration-chicago-pepper-spray/b8454720-be71-11f0-8eee-a78486b4c797_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/2025/11/10/immigration-chicago-pepper-spray/b8454720-be71-11f0-8eee-a78486b4c797_story.html)

Sophia Tareen | AP

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CHICAGO — A suburban Chicago father and his 1-year-old daughter were pepper-sprayed at close range as they headed grocery shopping over the weekend and happened upon federal immigration agents, the family said.

Rafael Veraza said the incident happened in a Sam's Club parking lot in Cicero on Saturday, amid [escalating clashes](#) that day between immigration agents and frustrated area residents. The suburb shares a border with the Chicago neighborhood of Little Village, a largely Mexican enclave that has frequently been at the center of a [federal immigration crackdown](#) that began two months ago in the nation's third-largest city.

Veraza said the family was in their car when they heard a helicopter and honking, common signals in the Chicago area these days that federal agents are nearby. They decided to leave.

That's when a masked agent pointed a pepper-spray gun through their vehicle's open window and fired. A cloudy substance hit Veraza in the face, which also affected his daughter, according to a video taken by the family.

"My daughter was trying to open her eyes," Veraza told reporters Sunday, as his wife held their daughter nearby. "She was struggling to breathe."

He said they were not protesting, honking their horns to warn others or trying to interfere.

A longtime pastor in the area, the Rev. Matt DeMateo, arrived at the scene to help and also recorded footage of Veraza struggling to open his eyes and of their daughter, Arianna, crying while her mother tried to comfort her.

"A family, and I shouldn't have to say this, but guess what? All U.S. citizens attacked while shopping," he said. "We need a better way."

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security flatly rejected the family's account.

"There was no crowd control or pepper spray deployed in a Sam's Club parking lot," Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin said in a statement sent to the Associated Press Monday.

A day of tensions

Saturday marked a day of chaotic encounters in the operation that has seen more than 3,200 arrests of people suspecting of violating immigration laws in the Chicago area. The aggressive tactics used by agents from Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement have repeatedly come under fire through legal challenges.

Agents have used chemical agents liberally across the city of 2.7 million and its many suburbs. They've also gone into a [daycare](#) to arrest a teacher, targeted rideshare drivers at O'Hare International Airport, thrown tear gas in a neighborhood preparing for a [Halloween parade](#) and gone after landscapers.

But the area hit the hardest has been Little Village, a neighborhood with one of the city's largest business corridors that's sometimes dubbed the "Mexico of the Midwest." Most restaurants and shops have signs warning ICE agents to stay out while neighbors use [whistles and car horns](#) to warn passersby of immigration agents who often stage in an area behind the Sam's Club.

DHS said agents were conducting enforcement operations when they encountered a "hostile crowd" and someone fired at federal officers. Federal officials alleged protesters threw paint cans and bricks at agents' vehicles. Chicago

police were called to respond to a call of gunshots fired at federal agents. No one was injured.

"Make no mistake: Our mission will continue despite the violence," McLaughlin said.

Area residents, including DeMateo, said agents deployed chemical agents, including tear gas and pepper balls, near his van without being provoked.

Some protesters confronted Chicago police officers they viewed as helping the federal agents. One police vehicle had its taillight smashed and windshield damaged.

DHS said eight U.S. citizens were arrested, but the agency did not say if they were charged. The agency did not respond to follow-up questions Monday.

Agent tactics under scrutiny

The tensions unfolded as a federal judge in Chicago has issued an [extensive injunction](#) limiting federal agents' use of force, saying that a [top Border Patrol official](#) leading an immigration crackdown repeatedly lied about threats posed by protesters.

DHS appealed that ruling on Sunday.

The order restricts agents from using certain riot control weapons, such as tear gas and pepper balls, "unless such force is objectively necessary" to prevent "an immediate threat." It also bars agents from using physical force, including shoving protesters and journalists to the ground, and it requires agents to give two warnings before using riot control weapons.

Separately, ICE has been compelled to [make improvements](#) at a [suburban processing center](#) activists say functions as a de facto detention center and is plagued by inhumane conditions.

